

ISRAEL.

Israel's coming into being has to be seen against the background of the opening chapters of Scripture. God's purposes for the world are frustrated by humanity's rebellion, and the world sits under his curse instead of his blessing. He begins again by reaffirming his creation promises to a particular family who in time become 'Israel.' Israel is thus that people through whom God's purpose to bless the world is to be fulfilled; this significance of Israel is reaffirmed at various points in the OT (e.g. Isa 2:1-4), and is the theological context in which the OT's preoccupation with the destiny of Israel has to be seen, even where the focus seems to be on Israel for its own sake.

As this story of Israel unfolds, various facets of what it means to be the people of God emerge. In the time of the ancestors, it is a family, brought into existence by God's sovereignty, power and grace; a people on the way, living between promise and fulfillment; a brotherhood in which conflict is overcome by reconciliation. From Moses to the Judges it is a theocratic nation, directly led by God, committed to a life of detailed obedience to his will, with human leadership structures not allowed to obscure his kingship; it experiences and in its life testifies to the blessing that comes to the people that is dependent on nothing but God's promises. From Saul to the exile it is an institutional state, rejecting the kingship of Yahweh for human kingship, yet continuing to prove the grace of God, now as the one who condescends to carve out for his people an alternative way if it will not have his highest one; it is open to learn from the world as well as to attract the world, but easily finds that the style of the nations becomes the style of the people God. With the exile, it becomes an afflicted remnant, its waywardness proving that God's ultimate purpose cannot be fulfilled even through it, yet its affliction also becoming the context of the insight that God can turn the affliction that comes from confronting the world into the means of bridging the gulf between the world and God. After the relative disappointment of the return from exile, it has to be a people that lives in the present dedicated to the praise of God for what he has done in the past, yet also to hope in him for what he is yet to do in the future.

When Jesus comes, it is to restore and renew Israel, but he is rejected as Messiah. He declares that Israel has forfeited its place as the people of God. God will exercise his capacity to raise up new children for Abraham among the nations (Matt 21:33—22:10). Paul speaks in similar terms (Phil 3:2-3; 1 Thes 2:14b-16). The early Christians thus see themselves as heirs of Israel's position as God's people (Phil 3:3; 1 Peter 2:9-10).

It might seem that the NT is thereby declaring that God has cast off Israel as such. Yet within OT times prophets have already spoken as radically, as if Israel was now cast off (Isa 5:1-7 lies behind Matt 21:33-44; see also Amos 9:7); yet this was evidently not a final rejection. Furthermore, other NT material presents another perspective. The matter is most systematically treated in Romans 9—11. Here Paul assumes that, though the bulk of contemporary Israel have forfeited their place in Israel, God has not cast off Israel itself. How could he do so without being unfaithful to himself (11:29)? On the contrary, God will restore it; it will come to faith in Jesus as Messiah. 'All Israel will be saved' (11:26; as is the case each time 'Israel' appears in these chapters, the reference

must be to Israel itself, not to the church). The rejection that comes through Israel's response to Jesus and to the preaching of the gospel is only a rejection of that generation, such as had happened in OT times. It has a place within God's purpose, to turn attention to preaching to the Gentiles, who share with Jews (they do not replace them) in the blessings of the gospel in the context of membership of the renewed Israel. In keeping with his teaching in Romans 9—11, Paul prays for God's mercy on 'the Israel of God' in Galatians 6: 16 (cf. KJV, NEB, GNB; it is less likely that here 'the Israel of God' is a term for the church (so RSV, NIV)—the church is not elsewhere described as 'Israel' or 'the new Israel' in the NT).

In contemporary discussion, the question of the theological significance of Israel arises in two further contexts. The first is that of the theological significance of Judaism. In the context of Jewish-Christian dialogue, some Christians, repenting of the history of Christian attitudes to the Jews as wholly cast off by God for crucifying the Messiah, have explored the possibility of Judaism and Christianity being alternative ways of salvation, both being the result of covenant relationships entered into by God with different groups. This is difficult to reconcile with Paul's handling of the issue in Romans 9 — 11. God's faithfulness to Israel on the basis of the commitment he made to it under the old covenant does not mean that the new covenant need not apply to it. The argument of Romans 9 — 11 works the opposite way: it is that commitment which guarantees that the new covenant also belongs to Israel and that it will come to Jesus to find the forgiveness that it, like the Gentile world, needs.

The second is the question of the theological significance of the return of some Jews to Palestine and of the establishment of the modern state of Israel. It is hard not to see this return as a sign of God's further fulfillment of his promises to Israel. Yet this affirmation needs to avoid implying that the Arab peoples (many of them Christians) are outside God's direct concern, to avoid forgetting that it is the worldwide Jewish people, not just those Jews who live in Palestine, who constitute the 'physical' Israel, and to avoid inferring that Christians (perhaps salving their consciences for attitudes to Jews in the past) should offer unequivocal support for the policies of the modern state of Israel, which arguably has no particular theological significance.

Bibliography

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